

MID DEVON DISTRICT COUNCIL

MINUTES of a **MEETING** of the **SCRUTINY COMMITTEE** held on 1 August 2018 at 2.00 pm

Present

Councillors

F J Rosamond (Chairman)
Mrs H Bainbridge, Mrs F J Colthorpe,
Mrs C P Daw, Mrs G Doe, Mrs S Griggs,
T G Hughes, Mrs B M Hull, F W Letch,
Mrs J Roach and T W Snow

Apologies

Councillor(s)

N A Way

Also Present

Councillor(s)

C R Slade, Mrs J B Binks and R M Deed

Also Present

Officer(s):

Stephen Walford (Chief Executive), Jill May (Director of Corporate Affairs and Business Transformation), John Bodley-Scott (Economic Development Team Leader) and Carole Oliphant (Member Services Officer)

33 APOLOGIES AND SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS (00.00.01)

Apologies were received from Cllr N A Way

34 PUBLIC QUESTION TIME (00.02.037)

Nick Quinn – Local resident stated he wanted to speak to agenda item 3 and 7.

He stated:

‘When this committee last met, I asked about the reporting of the Council’s FOI performance. I asked why there was such a large difference between the performance figures shown in the corporate performance indicators presented to Scrutiny and those quoted by the Chairman in his Annual Report.

In the minutes you can see the Officer’s answer, where she states that the figures shown in the corporate performance indicator tables are not real monthly performance figures at all – but are cumulative ‘year to date’ percentages’

She admitted that some very bad performance earlier in the year had affected the figures so much that they were 20% out from the actual monthly performance.

Elected Members must be given accurate statistics to do their job.

It is evident that the current performance indicator system, which allows differences for 20% from actual, is not fit for purpose and needs to be changed.

Scrutiny Committee should be the driver for this change – so my question, through the Chair is:

Would this Committee please consider adding, to the list of Agenda item 7 a review of the performance indicators given to Elected Members’.

In response the Chairman confirmed that this would be added to the list of Agenda item 7.

Sue Scur – Local resident wanted to ask why Palmerston Park had been left out of phase two of the upgrade to superfast broadband. She explained that the BT cabinet numbered 10/1 needed to be upgraded but BT had informed local residents that they would need to pay £500 each to enable this. She confirmed that she had been in touch with local Ward Members about the situation.

In response Cllr F J Colthorpe said that as she was the County Council Member for that Ward she would pick this up with the resident.

35 **MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING (00.08.25)**

The minutes of the last meeting held on 18th June 2018 were approved as a correct record and **SIGNED** by the Chairman.

36 **CHAIRMAN'S ANNOUNCEMENTS (00.08.49)**

The Chairman had no announcements to make.

37 **MEMBER OF PARLIAMENT NEIL PARISH (00.09.07)**

The Chairman welcomed Neil Parish MP to the meeting.

The Committee put the following questions to the MP.

1. *Could he briefly discuss the implications of Brexit in relation to agriculture and the rural areas? What are the implications for food, farming and the environment in Mid Devon as a consequence of Brexit as currently envisaged? What preparations are being contemplated in response to "no deal"?*

The Member of Parliament said that a DEFRA report was looking at this issue sector by sector and the impact of different deals. He said that the Government didn't want tariffs and that was why the Prime Minister's deal helped with trade and with Northern Ireland. He said that he felt that now both sides were squaring up to each other it was probably a time when you would see a deal completed.

He explained about the current imports and exports of food and felt that more dairy products could be produced in the country as opposed to relying on imports.

He reiterated that no sides were talking about imposing tariffs and that there was work going on in all departments regarding the scenario of a no deal and that the Government was looking at the various systems of moving goods through barriers.

He referred to the current drought situation and that the weather would make a difference to food prices in the short term but wouldn't make a difference to Brexit negotiations.

He explained that the Government just had to get on a get a deal, especially when it came to agriculture. He said he wanted to remain but he accepted the vote and that the country needed to get some form of deal. He confirmed that he had full confidence in Prime Minister to deliver one.

The Committee asked if there was a minimum food production level and was there room to support it? Neil Parish explained that the UK was a temperate climate and we produced a fair amount of food. He explained that currently the UK was 58% self-sufficient and he wanted to see that maintained. He felt that in the future more food would need to be grown on less available land.

2. Do you consider that proposals for an alternative route via Longwood Lane, for the quarry lorries, avoiding Burlescombe has now hit the buffers or is there still a realistic hope that it may still go ahead.

Neil Parish explained that he was meeting with the liaison committee to try and consider options available which may include getting the lorries further through the quarry. This was an ongoing issue that he was monitoring.

3. Would you be prepared to lobby the Housing Minister concerning the five year land supply which Mid Devon has been unable to show and probably never will as we do not sit on swathes of redundant industrial land. This unrealistic target has left us hostage to several undesirable planning application.

The Member of Parliament stated that he had had quite a lot to do with redundant farm sites and found it a frustrating exercise. He felt that MDDC numbers were moving forward and he saw a lot of housing being built. He felt it was a situation where people wanted affordable housing but didn't want it built next to them. He wanted to compliment MDDC on the amount of council housing built in the district. He stated that if the Group wanted him to lobby Government with regard to the targets he would take this up with the Housing Minister.

Land value needed to be recognised in infrastructure costs. For example Cullompton required another entrance on the motorway going south. He felt that it could be done but it would be expensive and this was where Government would have to step in at help.

4. There is significant interest amongst the 3 Head teachers in 11-16 schools in Tiverton, Cullompton and Uffculme in respect of engaging in a review of future options of A level provision in Mid Devon, particularly in the light of the major housebuilding programme of over 8000 houses envisaged in the MDDC Local Plan. Could we call upon your services to navigate the options with the Department of Education in considering such a review?

The Member of Parliament explained that the first step was the relocation of the High School at Tiverton, following that the issue with A level provision could be considered. He explained that he had been to many careers evenings at Tiverton High School and that many of the youngsters said they wanted to go on to Exeter

College and not stay in Tiverton. He said that Petroc couldn't be expected to provide an A level service if there were only 20-30 pupils interested in them. He felt that if the numbers of pupils wanting A level provision increased with new homes being built, then he thought that the schools would need to come together to provide it. He said he would talk to Petroc again as he was not happy that they had dropped A level provision. He confirmed that Uffculme School was about to do a deal with Axe Valley and any future A Level provision would need to be a consolidation between all the providers.

5. Should the government look again at "right to buy" from council stock?

Neil Parish said that he felt that the Right to Buy Scheme was the right thing to do but mistakes were made in that successive Governments did not replace the houses sold.

He said that the idea of affordable homes was for homes for rent and shared ownership and not for resale and that a certain amount of affordable homes had to be retained otherwise once they were sold they were no longer affordable.

Some of the Committee disagreed that MDDC had built enough affordable housing and said that the Council needed to build more social housing, including flats.

The Member of Parliament maintained that MDDC had taken on sites which have been difficult to develop.

6. Universal superfast broadband coverage remains an elusive concept in Mid Devon, especially in rural areas. A recent report states that the UK slipped to 35th in the global table of broadband speeds, below the likes of Madagascar and Bulgaria. Locally a DCC Scrutiny report called for greater transparency in a critical analysis of the performance of Connecting Devon and Somerset which appears to have been rejected by CDS. How do we hold CDS to account? When will the project be completed? Will the 95% coverage be achieved? What happens to the remaining 5%?

The Member of Parliament stated that all parties needed to work together but BT had problems with their contractors and the whole process was slower than expected and frustrating. He had raised the issue with Connect Devon and Somerset as in some areas only half of a village was connected. He said he was happy to take this up with BT and it would be useful to pocket complaints together and urged Members to contact him with their issues. He said that there was still a lot that BT had to do under their original contract.

He explained that the figure of 95% was the national figure and the Committee had to accept that some remote properties could not be connected. The last 5% were where different technology would be required to connect the properties to superfast broadband as it was not possible to install fibre optic into all properties.

The Committee said that Spain and Portugal had 71% coverage and questioned why the UK couldn't have the same.

He explained that the Spanish & Portuguese didn't mind digging up the roads where as the UK spent more time arguing and discussing it. He said there was a share of money coming back from BT and this was starting to be spent.

7. Michael Gove has proposed a Protected Landscapes Review of designated landscapes (10 National Parks, 34 AONBs) What are the terms of reference and how will those working in and for them be able to input into the process directly?

He explained that the concept was from Michael Gove to create National Parks and he himself had mixed views as he felt that Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) worked quite well. He said the idea was to embrace ANOB's into the National Parks but he didn't think the terms of reference were there yet. It all depended on how the Agriculture and Environmental Bill fitted together and environmentally the European Commission could hold the Government to account. He was waiting to see the outcome.

8. Will the Review allow for the consideration of a possible AONB designation for the Exe Valley- a beautiful part of the country?

He asked if the Committee had had a surge of people who wanted the AONB or was it just a couple of people? He said that if there was a real head of steam, there was no reason why it couldn't go forward for DEFRA and Michael Gove to take look at it.

He explained that review by Michael Gove was a concept and he didn't think that DEFRA had caught up. He advised the Committee to give it more time and see what came through from Government and to make sure you know what you want and get a head of steam behind it. He asked the meeting how far the AONB would go.

Economic Development Team Leader explained that the proposed AONB would go from the Exmoor Boundary to the Culm Valley.

The MP requested a map of the proposed AONB and agreed to take a look at it.

9. Natural England is being scaled back- how does this fit (or not) with the ambitions of the 25 Year Environmental Plan (25YEP) which seeks to deal with the environmental impact of "unprecedented expansion in population consumption, energy use waste and population"?

This question was answered in the response to question 7.

10. Natural England has informed the AONB that they are no longer able to provide monitoring data free of charge- information used to fulfil a statutory function of the designation. Will DEFRA be offering additional funds to cover the shortfall or can the policy be re-thought?

The Member of Parliament explained that the biggest problem was that Natural England were now considering land management schemes but not getting them up and running. He said there was a big issue and he was not entirely sure it was due to staffing levels and he suspected that there may be some amalgamation in the future.

He said that he was due to talk to Natural England at a Select Committee in the autumn and would raise this with Government Departments and Michael Gove.

11. As many experts forecast, Universal Credit is associated with growing rent arrears which impacts on Councils. Is Government monitoring the situation to protect local Councils?

The Member of Parliament stated that he saw this coming because of his local government experience. He said that the Government had reduced the time people had to wait for their money to two weeks which was better but they were not getting the support systems in place quickly enough. He acknowledged that MDDC had Officers on the front desk dealing with Universal Credit. He said that agencies had to work together on this one and step in quickly if rents were not being paid. He understood the principle of Universal Credit but not the practice as some people spent the money for rent on other things. He asked Members to identify where there were areas that could be ironed out and to let him know so he could take this forward. He explained that he didn't want individual recipients to suffer or the Council to lose revenue. He had made the point to Government Ministers that so much had to be done on line now and some people couldn't cope with that.

He asked the Group to let him know of things that could help.

12. Tiverton has a problem with drugs which is of great concern to our constituents. There is trading of drugs being carried out openly on the streets in broad daylight & near our schools & where young children are present. What are the police & government doing about this increasing problem please, this needs addressing before it escalates further.

He explained that he was due to have a meeting in Axminster where they also had a problem with drugs. He said he was happy to meet with Officers on the ground and hear the problems first hand.

Members stated that it was very worrying that drug dealing was happening in broad daylight on Tiverton's streets and Members were getting approached by residents requesting them to deal with the situation as the Police had such a low profile and didn't deal with low level crime.

The Member of Parliament said he would raise the issue at Shaun Sawyer level as quite rightly that fact drug dealers were so brazen was a worry.

Members of the Committee then explained that they had had meetings with the local police and had been told that it was down to the public to report instances. The Police were currently aware of where drugs were being dealt and were building a case. Members stated that there was an issue in that within Tiverton Police Station the only jail cell was too small and couldn't be used so the Police were reluctant to arrest anybody as they would have to take them to Exeter to be charged. Concerns about the level of policing in the farming community were raised and that the public felt totally exposed regarding their machinery being stolen. It was felt that the Police didn't have the resources to deal with rural crime.

Neil Parish responded by saying that he would raise the issues with the Chief Constable, Shaun Sawyer and that the Government would look at what was spent on the Police. He said that it was not an easy one to fix but it was obvious that more had to be done.

13. *The South West is thought of nationally as a tourist Mecca, we have the English Riviera on our doorstep and we live in the gateway to many of our tourist hotspots. What is the government doing to ensure that our tourism industry is fully supported and allowed to grow & flourish ? Mid Devon has no real identity for its tourism and is very overlooked in this field. Tiverton for instance has a great many attractions that many towns would love to have Mid Devon is very beautiful & is steeped in history and lovely towns/villages with many many great markets & independent shops & businesses. This is an issue that needs prompt action if we want to sustain & grow in this very competitive market.*

The Member of Parliament said that the area was doing a lot to promote itself but he didn't have a magic solution. He said that although J27 was controversial it may help stop people tearing past the area on the M5. He was sure there was more that could be done through the Tourist Board.

The Committee reflected on the deterioration of some of the South West seaside towns and that it would be hard work to build that back up.

The Member of Parliament stated that a lot was achieved through the Portas money in Tiverton and was a need to promote the area and link yourselves into Devon attractions. He highlighted the need for investment in the area as visitors expected high standards and value for money.

14. *When will the Government's National Planning Practice Guidance be updated in relation to the recently published new National Planning Policy Framework. We seek clarity specifically in relation to when and how the Government's standard method for calculating local housing need will be used where strategic policies (in local plans) are out of date, for the purpose of assessing 5-year housing supply .*

This question was answered in the response to question 3.

15. *The Government are spending millions promoting 1st generation smart meters which are reported to have some problems and which is why I shall not have one installed in my house. The company that installs smart meters for my electricity supplier says 2nd generation meters "might be available next year". What is the problem with the production of these much improved meters?*

The Member of Parliament confirmed that it was not the Government spending the money; this was being promoted and funded by individual supply companies. He felt that smart meters were oversold in the first place as they only tell you what you are using and when you are using it. He said that the biggest issue was that there were assurances that the meters would be changeable between suppliers but they are not. He said that the Government needed to put pressure on the supply companies to deliver.

38 **SCRUTINY OFFICER REPORT (01.31.22)**

The Group had before it and **NOTED** the information provided by the Scrutiny Officer regarding various areas that he had been asked to look into on their behalf.

There were no questions asked.

39 IDENTIFICATION OF ITEMS FOR THE NEXT MEETING (01.38.00)

The following items were identified for future meetings:

- A review of the Performance Indicators given to Elected Members
- How many experienced district Nurses are being lost. How many have left and what the current shortfall is.
- Why sickness levels are so high in the NHS

(The meeting ended at 3.42 pm)

CHAIRMAN